

Accepting Ourselves and One Another
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Invocation

Keep me from going to sleep too soon.
Or if I go to sleep too soon
Come wake me up. Come any hour
Of night. Come whistling up the road
Stomp on the porch. Bang on the door.
Make me get out of bed and come
And let you in and light a light.
Tell me the northern lights are on
And make me look. Or tell me clouds
Are doing something to the moon
They never did before, and show me.
See that I see. Talk to me till
I'm half as wide awake as you
And start to dress wondering why
I ever went to bed at all.
Tell me the walking is superb.
Not only tell me but persuade me
You know I am not too hard persuaded.

- Robert Francis

Ancient Reading Matthew 7:1-14, excerpt

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ... first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Modern Reading *When Things Fall Apart* Pema Chodron

One of the classic Buddhist teachings on hope and fear concerns what are known as the eight worldly dharmas. These are four pairs of opposites – four things that we like and become attached to and four things that we don't like and try to avoid. The basic message is that when we are caught up in the eight worldly dharmas, we suffer.

First, we like pleasure; we are attached to it. Conversely, we don't like pain. Second, we like and are attached to praise. We try to avoid criticism and blame. Third we like and are attached to fame. We dislike and try to avoid disgrace. Finally, we are attached to gain, to getting what we want. We don't like losing what we have.

According to this very simple teaching, becoming immersed in these four pairs of opposites – pleasure and pain, loss and gain, fame and disgrace, and praise and blame – is what keeps us stuck in the pain of samsara.

Whenever we're feeling good, our thoughts are usually about things we like – praise, gain, pleasure and fame. When we're feeling uncomfortable and irritable and fed up, our thoughts are probably revolving around something like pain, loss, disgrace or blame.

Let's take praise and blame. Someone walks up to us and says, "You are old." If it just so happens that we want to be old, we feel really good. We feel as if we've just been praised. That gives us enormous pleasure and a sense of gain and fame. But suppose we have been obsessing all year about getting rid of wrinkles and firming up our jaw line. When someone says, "you are old," we feel insulted. We've just been blamed, and we feel a corresponding sense of pain.

Even if we don't talk about this particular teaching any further, we can already see that many of our mood swings are related to how we interpret what happens. If we look closely at our mood swings, we'll notice that something always sets them off. We carry around a subjective reality that is continually triggering our emotional reactions. Someone says, "You are old," and we enter into a particular state of mind – either happy or sad, delighted or angry. For someone else, the same experience might be completely neutral.

Words are spoken, letters are received, phone calls are made, food is eaten, things appear or don't appear. We wake up in the morning, we open our eyes, and events happen all day long, until we go to sleep. A lot is happening in our sleep too. All night long we encounter the people and events of our dreams. How do we react to what occurs? Are we attached to certain kinds of experiences? Do we reject or avoid others? How hooked do we get by these eight worldly dharmas?

The irony is that **we** make up the eight worldly dharmas. We make them up in reaction to what happens to us in this world. They are nothing concrete in themselves. Even more strange is that **we** are not all that solid either. We have a concept of ourselves that we reconstruct moment by moment and reflexively try to protect. But this concept that we are protecting is questionable. It's all "much ado about nothing" – like pushing and pulling a vanishing thought.

We might feel that somehow we should try to eradicate these feelings of pleasure and pain, loss and gain, praise and blame, fame and disgrace. A more practical approach would be to get to know them, see how they hook us, see how they color our perception of reality, see how they aren't all that solid. Then the eight worldly dharmas become the means for growing wiser as well as kinder and more content.

Meditation

For all our joys, for all our sorrows, for all the ways people in our world are now aware of joy and sorrow, we make ourselves present to all of it, for each person is a puzzle.

Sometimes from the inside, we feel like some pieces are missing
Perhaps one we love is no longer with us,
Perhaps one talent we desire eludes us,
Perhaps a moment that required grace found us clumsy.

Perhaps, from the inside, it feels like some pieces are missing,
Like a missing tooth, our tongue worries around that empty hole.

We are puzzles not only to ourselves but sometimes to each other.

Puzzles are something we yearn to solve, a mystery we should be able to solve.
The mystery really is that we are whole even with all our missing pieces.

Our missing pieces are empty spaces we might long to fill,
Empty spaces which make us who we are.

The mystery is that we are only what we are
And that what we are is enough.

In the gray stillness of the morning, into the accepting peace of a still sky, let us offer our failings,
our inadequacies, into the silence.

And may we know in that silence that we are accepted, by God and by this company, exactly as
we are.

Accepted – missing pieces and all.

Adapted from Mark Mosher De Wolf

Sermon

You know the moments from the readings, don't you? Caught between praise and blame. Wanting to be praised and not getting it, so blaming someone else for not giving it to you. As if that would make us feel whole. Getting caught in the "I'm right. You're wrong." Take the plank out of your eye before you can see the speck in the eye of the other. Judge not lest you be judged. So it is with conflicts, our differences, the times we get stuck and cannot seem to find a way out. We can seek to use different tools for managing those times. Seek understanding, find the gifts in one another, rather than the blaming place, negotiating when we can, collaborating if we are able, supporting one another when we are not sure what to do. And accepting on another, truly accepting.

Often we do well with these tools when we are in a class, with a group, talking to our partner, when we are sitting here at church, but when we go back to the person with whom we have had a conflict – especially if it is someone with whom we will be in relationship for a long time – we may find that we are stuck again, we can't hold onto that new piece of learning. And we go back to the blaming game. Or the pain place, - dumb me, I just can't get it. I am only going to be

acceptable here if I can prove that I am right, or I will be disgraced. We yearn for a place of acceptance, yearn for the enlightenment that will bring us a sense of wholeness and perfection and peace.

What if we found that it was here, right where we are, that we didn't need to run here or run there to find it. What if we were part of a family, or church, or neighborhood that accepted us just as we are, with all our quirks, with all of our missing puzzle pieces. A place that said you can work here on whatever you want to learn, and while you do that, we will hold you. What if? Now I can hear some of you saying, "Hey! People do terrible things to each other. I can't just accept them with all that bad behavior." Are we talking about their behavior or their personhood? Do we accept them as having a spark of the divine in them, as our transcendentalist forebears expressed it? Or do we see each human as a fallen being, one who will sin over and over? And, does being accepted, just as we are, with all our missing pieces, and invited to grow in ways we choose, create a place of spiritual wholeness for ourselves and others? Radically accepted, just as we are. What if?

A few summers ago, I took a workshop with Buddhist priest Jack Kornfield on Meditation and also went to the UU conference center on Star Island where I took a Poetry and Painting class. In the meditation class I learned that I was very hard on myself, even in meditation. Brought up by parents who had themselves been taught to be critical of themselves and others, I tended to operate on the theory that if I removed anything that was "wrong" with me, I would be perfect. I have had to learn over and over in my life, that if I noticed all the negatives, that was what I was left with: awareness of all those negative things. It is when we forgive ourselves for not knowing or not doing something, for seeing what might be more effective, but not beating ourselves up for it – and when we readily forgive others for the ways their needs tripped us up on getting our needs met – then we feel a great sense of peace. When we do not experience or give to others forgiveness, then we become diminished. And that is not a place from which we can grow. I thought when I went to these workshops that I knew all this.

It seemed, however, that I needed another life lesson. I have had many periods in my life, and perhaps you have too, in which I meditated regularly and when I felt that sense of okay-ness in my world. But I hadn't been meditating for months. I told myself I was too busy. I had so many other things to do. I could just substitute relaxing to music. Besides, I often came out of the meditation frustrated because I just couldn't get to that sense of peace. I was distracted by a sound, or remembered something I just had to write down before I forgot. So, I came to this workshop to learn how to do meditation RIGHT, darn it. And one of the first things Jack said was, "There is no right way to meditate." What, I said?? "Do what works," Jack instructed us. "And stay with it. Sit in the one seat. Stay with any discomfort, pain and see where it came from, what it has to teach you and then you can let it go. Stay with your practice." Or as he put it one day, "Put your [backside] - only that's not the words he used, on the cushion, and take what you get.

Now, I've tried different forms of meditation, as so many have before me, to enhance my spiritual growth. I bought the right cushion, the right books, sat in the right position, held my hands in the proper mudhra, and sat there on the one seat. But my mind wandered. My muscles got tired. The folks upstairs were making noise and I couldn't CONCENTRATE. It finally penetrated, then go with what you have. Let your mind expand out into that noise. There isn't a right way. Sit and let it come. Don't judge yourself, just notice: "I am thinking or I am hearing"; then return to your breathing. Or "When I have this thought, I make myself uncomfortable." Just notice, then return to watching your breath. A new way of practicing, letting in whatever thoughts arise. And

what they can teach me. No judging, no blaming. Sitting within a beloved community, as we do during prayer and meditation here.

A few weeks later, I went to Star Island. I took the poetry and painting class because I wanted to learn to write better and paint well. You probably get it now – I was still grasping, attaching. I wanted all the pleasure, the praise, the gain. But I was reminded again: that is not what this class was about. This is not what **life** is about.

We were invited the first day to go outside, stand and slowly turn our bodies around 360 degrees and just notice. We all did that. And then we were given a phrase: I am like an island because..... We could write whatever we wanted – poetry, prose, just some words. We all looked at each other, took a deep breath and commenced what was to be a spiritual journey in acceptance of ourselves and one another. Becoming a beloved community, a community of love and support. It didn't matter if you knew how to draw, whether you wrote for a living and supposedly were better at it than others. We listened, we shared, we cried, we laughed, we accepted one another's stories and art and writings with joy and grace and new insights. We reflected on how the worlds we live in had so often judged us. How well can you write? How well can you draw? You're not good enough to be at this company, what do you know? With whom did you study. Instead, in this atmosphere of beloved community, we produced writings that drew us into deeper understandings of ourselves and others. And it was good stuff, too, insightful prose and poetry. We drew, using something we had written and saw new metaphors in the drawing, simply because we had not asked ourselves first, "Am I doing this right. This person over here draws so much better than I do." I got in touch with the times in my life I had felt judged – and was found wanting. How good it felt to let go of that and simply be accepted! None of us had known each other before this class, so we were just present to what was sitting in the seat right in front of us. We were in the moment. I learned again how often we get in our own way – we try to force something, try to make ourselves into something perfect, with no flaws or missing pieces. When we have preconceived ideas about what others are supposed to be and do according to our standards ' "they coulda, they shoulda, they can't make me, " we are diminishing ourselves and them. We fear that we will not be accepted. We are frozen by others' expectations, and our spirits feel trapped, or dry, or deserted.

One day, our delightful instructor suggested (she never demanded) that we do one of our 360's and then write on "My spirit's home is..." I wrote that my spirit's home is on Paradox Drive. When the time for sharing came, I talked about the times I had felt comforted, as if I were sitting within a parent's loving arms and at other times had felt that life was buffeting me, a wind whipping me around. I wrote a poem that day which ended . "Holding both, I weep."

With that, a member of the class started to cry, and told us what she had told only one other person. We listened. Some of us wept tears with her. Later that day we were all invited to write on the words that had opened her heart to sharing. "Holding both, I weep." This class participant wanted to find a God in the midst of her pain, but could not. What she found in the midst of that group was the holiness she sought – she was accepted just the way she was; she had all she needed to cope with the wind buffeting her about. She had seen God as judge, a being who would find her lacking in Quality. We all got in touch with the ways we force ourselves into molds not of our own making. note), spirit's home already has all it needs.

Let us pause here. I want to invite you to reflect on something. What we have really been talking about is spiritual growth, what a friend calls growing a soul. I'd like for you to think

of a time when you felt completely accepted, for who you are, and not judged. Perhaps this was with a friend, in a marriage or in a community such as this one. Helped to grow, because that's what deep relationships are about, helping one another grow into the fullness of our being

Remember, no judging, no blaming. Just notice what comes into your mind and your heart. Then I am going to invite you to, if you wish, share your reflection with one or two other people. Then we will return to the sermon. Let's enter a time of reflection for just a few moments.

So many teachers tell us that the beloved community, the enlightenment, the holy perfection we seek has been here with us all along. Julian of Norwich describes this perfection at the center of her prayers with these words, "And all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." It is the awareness as our hearts open to wholeness that we can awaken to wellness in every moment. And if we do not wake up on our own, someone can awaken us, as in the opening words. "Come wake me up and tell me the Northern Lights are spreading across the sky – just come look." "Like Jesus "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

Like the instructor at Star Island, "Do a 360 – it's all around you."

Jack Kornfield in his book *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, quotes Ajahn Buddhadasa, A Buddhist monk, directing his students to seek Nirvana, or I would say Beloved Community, in the simplest moments. "Nirvana," he would say "Is the coolness of letting go – the inherent delight of experience when there is no grasping or resistance to life."

Anyone can see, says Kornfield, that if grasping and aversion were with us all day and night without ceasing, who could ever stand them. Under that condition, living things would either die or become insane. Instead we survive because there are natural periods of coolness, of wholeness and ease. In fact, they last longer than the fires of our grasping and fear. It is this that sustains us. We have periods of rest making us refreshed, alive, well. Why don't we feel thankful for this everyday Nirvana.

It is then, about letting go of the grasping, letting go of judging whether we are getting pleasure or pain, praise or blaming. We enter the place of solace, of letting go, just as we do when we go to sleep at night. We begin to treasure those moment of wholeness. We begin to trust the world and others, just as we trust our sleep and trust our breath as it breathes itself. And we begin to trust ourselves. We realize that we reach wholeness, and let go of conflict and strife, only when we have loving kindness towards ourselves. We cannot make another feel whole, we can lead a person to the gate, to the edge of the abyss, we can hold another while they find it, but only if you love yourself just as you love others with loving kindness, will you finally feel whole.

So, I offer you this poem I wrote for my new friend at that conference at Star Island.

Come to the edge of the abyss,
I, too, see it yawning before you.
Come, peek over the edge.
Don't be frightened.

I know you have tried to cross that chasm before,
Struggled down that treacherous slope.
For I, too, have known near-drowning in the dark,

Bottomless waters below.

My heart has hammered its fear along with yours,
A staccato rhythm.
I cannot do this.
I cannot. Cannot.

Stand still,
Listen,
A voice will speak to you.
“Leap, Leap and the net will appear.”

And your heart starts singing,
Low, urgent, it tells you,
This is just where you were meant to be.

Your body becomes an arrow,
Polished obsidian,
Aimed, the bow of your commitment vibrates.
Heart aflame, you fly over the chasm,
Into your own wisdom.

We have all we need. We are accepted just as we are. In the stillness of this morning, into the accepting peace of a still sky, let us offer our full selves, into the silence.

And may we know in that silence that we are accepted, by God and by this company, exactly as we are.

Accepted – missing pieces and all. And then, accepted, at peace, we awaken to Beloved Community, to the knowledge that we are loved, loving and lovable. And all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well, in a world without end. Amen.